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ELIZABETH MITCHELL

*The Ghost
of Yesterday*



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«Издательские решения»

Mitchell E.

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НЕЗАКОННОЕ ПОТРЕБЛЕНИЕ НАРКОТИЧЕСКИХ СРЕДСТВ,
ПСИХОТРОПНЫХ ВЕЩЕСТВ, ИХ АНАЛОГОВ ПРИЧИНЯЕТ
ВРЕД ЗДОРОВЬЮ, ИХ НЕЗАКОННЫЙ ОБОРОТ ЗАПРЕЩЕН
И ВЛЕЧЕТ УСТАНОВЛЕННУЮ ЗАКОНОДАТЕЛЬСТВОМ

ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬ. Allison Green spent her youth in the shadow of her mother's pain on the cold streets of Indianapolis. She believed that first love would be her salvation and the ghosts of her past would remain locked away forever. Years later, Allison learns that time doesn't heal — it only makes the shadows longer. As old family secrets resurface, she must face the mistakes she tried to outrun. Can she build a future on the ruins of the past, or will the ghosts of days gone by claim her?

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The Ghost of Yesterday

Elizabeth Mitchell

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PART 1

CHAPTER 1

“Dear Diary, today is Thursday, October 2, 2014.

It’s been four months since Mom and I moved from the suburbs to Indianapolis, and just as long since my last entry. So much has happened that I don’t even have the strength to tell it all at once. The move, how I handled it, my relationship with Mom... all of that is important, sure, but the reason I’m writing now is different. It feels foreign to me, and that’s exactly why I want to capture it.

When we moved, I was certain my life was officially going off the rails. A new neighborhood, a new school, strangers, and finally, a new house Mom bought without even consulting me. A true ‘clean slate’ — all forced upon a socially awkward teenager. I was bracing for the worst, but I must have unknowingly sold my soul to the devil, because reality turned out to be the exact opposite of my fears.

The school in the Near Northside area where I was enrolled surprisingly wasn’t as crappy as my last one. In a month of classes, I haven’t dealt with bullying even once. Plus, they have a great system here: every newcomer (there are three of us this year) is assigned a mentor from their future classmates to help them adapt.

I got Judy Anderson. On the first day, I took her for a pushy bitch, but later I kicked myself for it. In reality, Judy turned out to be sweet and friendly — she just really loves to talk.

On the very first day, she gave me a long tour of the school and campus, introduced me to the kids who were supposed to help me pick extracurriculars. And on the second day, she introduced me to her friends, and they accepted me into the group surprisingly fast.

This kind of hospitality is still new to me. I’ve never had more than one friend at a time, and here there are five of them at once, and they’re all wonderful:

Rachel Torres is Judy’s best friend. She’s an honors student but not a bore at all. She has a great sense of humor and a musical taste similar to mine. Her parents are from Mexico, which explains her striking Southern looks. I like her.

Tom Calhoun is Judy’s boyfriend. They started dating last summer when they had barely turned fifteen. Personally, I think starting a serious relationship that early is risky business, but that’s their deal. Tom, unlike most students, comes from a wealthy family but is very well-bred. He’s helpful, gallant, sits on the student council, and is gunning for school president this year. Every parent’s dream.

Sam Davis — this is going to sound stereotypical, but Sam is a tall Black guy who’s been obsessed with basketball since he was six and plans to make a career out of it. He talks about it so often that sometimes he seems like a total bore.

Miles Evans is Sam’s best friend. I barely know anything about him except his last name and his passion for arguing with the World History teacher (we have that class together). We also cross paths in Geography and Chemistry, but it seems only Mr. Groh is ‘lucky’ enough to listen to his fierce debates about military battles. Sometimes it’s annoying, but overall Miles is sweet. Though, in my opinion, he smokes way too much.

And, of course, Judy. I’ve already written about her. I’m so glad we became friends. Without her, I doubt I would have found anyone in this school.

And I definitely doubt that Miles, whom I’ve barely spoken to, would have offered to walk me home today.

Does this mean he likes me? I don’t know. He asked the question right in the cafeteria, in front of everyone, after which Judy and Rachel didn’t give me a moment’s peace all day. Gossiping in the restroom, Judy confessed: Miles had been whining to her for two weeks that he didn’t have the nerve

to ask me out. Rachel, for her part, got annoyed that she was out of the loop and left without wanting to share in the collective joy.

As for me, I still find it hard to describe my feelings. It's like winning a thousand bucks in the lottery: everyone around you is cheering, and you're just standing there not knowing what to do with the winnings.

I've never been in a relationship. I'm only fifteen. I don't know what love is, how it's born, what it feels like to touch, or if it's even necessary — if, in the end, someone can suddenly replace it with pain. I'm scared, but also terribly curious. So, even though I froze up in the cafeteria, I still said yes.

We agreed to meet at the main entrance. I was a bit late after Math, and Miles was waiting for me outside the gates, finishing, as he later admitted, his third cigarette. Sam and Rachel vanished the moment they saw me.

As soon as I walked up, Miles licked his full, chapped lips, took a final drag, and flicked the butt into the trash can. My knees were shaking slightly, but I tried not to show it. I wanted to seem more experienced with guys than I actually was, even though I wasn't even sure if anything would come of us.

To my surprise, we found plenty of common ground. And while Miles was usually the one initiating the conversation, every topic resonated with me. We chatted about everything under the sun, getting to know each other and not noticing time slipping away.

I still remember the cool wind rustling the fallen leaves under our feet and how quickly it got dark. At first, I chalked it up to the overcast weather, but it turned out our walk had stretched into two hours instead of the usual thirty minutes.

I've never been able to talk to anyone for so long about the things I love. It's funny: just yesterday I knew almost nothing about Miles and didn't see him as a potential boyfriend, and today I'm writing about him in my diary as the most pleasant person in the world.

Is this really how love is born?"

Smiling at the thoughts of the day, Allison closed the thick notebook with its hard, sticker-covered cover. She hid her secret stash at the bottom of her desk's lower drawer, burying it under a pile of small junk.

Allison was a typical teenager with her own quirks: she loved the music of long-dead rebels and cold cereal for breakfast; she wore oversized sweaters and old sneakers until they were full of holes. She spent most of her time in her room, teaching herself to play an old, out-of-tune guitar while her parents spent their lives at jobs they hated.

And although Allison's family situation differed from that of her peers, in every other way she was just like everyone else: desperately trying to hide her true self behind a screen of normalcy to feel like she "belonged."

The clock on her bedside table showed almost ten in the evening. It was time to go to bed. Allison lazily changed into her pajamas and hopped onto the bed, which had been unmade since yesterday. Lying in a star shape under the dim light of the lamp, she replayed moments of the walk in her memory, playfully kicking her legs to the beat of the quiet music in her headphones.

Suddenly, there was a soft but distinct knock. Allison instantly switched off the music and jumped out of bed.

"Allison, are you asleep yet?" a tired female voice asked from behind the door.

The door creaked open, and Amanda, Allison's mother, entered the room. Every movement betrayed her exhaustion.

"No... I was just about to. Did something happen?" the girl asked, flustered, putting her phone aside and trying not to look her mother in the eye.

Amanda leaned against the doorframe, adjusting a heavy dark-green robe that was about two sizes too big for her. She kept wrapping the wide terry sleeves around herself as if trying to hide inside them. Crossing her arms over her chest and clutching a glass of wine in one hand, she said:

“No... nothing happened. I just wanted to see how things were going at the new school. How are your grades? Have you made any friends? We barely talk, and I just... wanted to know how my favorite daughter is doing.”

“Everything’s fine, Mom. You don’t have to worry. I signed up for the music club the other day... You know that; you asked me literally yesterday,” Allison replied without looking up. She was afraid to see the usual smoldering contempt in her mother’s eyes.

“Mmm. And I can’t ask again?” Amanda’s tone shifted sharply. “I’m your mother, and I have the right to know what’s going on in your life every day. Every hour, if I want! I do so much for you... Don’t you dare distance yourself from me.”

Amanda’s voice rose with every word. Allison knew this tone — the inflections became fluid, words tangled, and sentences blurred into one continuous accusation.

“Mom... you promised...” Allison finally looked at her. Her gaze held nothing but disappointment.

“Yes, and so what?! Don’t you dare reproach me!” Amanda shouted in a trembling voice. “If it weren’t for your father...”

She cut herself off sharply, suppressing a flash of hatred. Even two years after the split, the pain hadn’t subsided. Every cell in her body was saturated with malice toward the world, and her daughter, a carbon copy of her father, was the heaviest and most hated reminder of the past.

“Mom, why are you doing this?” Allison was on the verge of tears.

“I repeat: don’t you think for a second you can blame me!” Amanda’s voice thundered. “You have no idea how hard it is for me! The divorce, the move, the custody battles! I’m working my skin off to raise you to be a decent person, closing my eyes to everything that happened!”

Amanda bored her gaze into her daughter’s emerald eyes. A lump formed in her throat. She didn’t even understand why she had started this conversation, which had once again turned into a screaming match. Allison, meanwhile, finally realized: her mother, who had promised to quit drinking and forget the past after the move, was too weak. This weakness bred a responsive rage in the girl.

“And you think it’s easy for me?!” she screamed. “Easy to know that I’m just as much of a ‘blank space’ to my father as I am to you? Do you know how the people I thought were my friends bullied me? The whole school pointed fingers! And then there was Dabria...”

Tears finally burst from her eyes. Amanda had nothing to counter, it was the truth. But she always placed her own suffering above all else, dismissing her daughter’s feelings as mere “teenage rebellion.”

“Don’t you even dare... raise your voice at me, you brat!” Her mother’s voice broke. “You think I moved here out of ambition? No, I was thinking of you, you ungrateful girl! So that people wouldn’t look at you sideways because of our divorce and your imaginary friend! And you pay me back with this pathetic behavior. And you even dare reproach me for my drinking. I have the right to relax after a day like this!”

Amanda drained the glass in one gulp, trying not to spill a drop. Despite her daughter’s state, she finished in a voice that was now ice-cold:

“I came here to talk... That’s it. Go to sleep. I don’t want to see you, you damn egoist.”

She slammed the door with a crash. Allison heard her mother go into the living room to watch a show about celebrity chefs, grabbing a new bottle of red on the way.

The girl collapsed to the floor, burying her face in her knees and sobbing hysterically. Every one of her mother’s words stung like a hundred knives. The one person who was supposed to protect her like a lioness protecting her cub had herself turned into a predator, ready to tear her apart.

All the euphoria from the walk with Miles, the feeling of being wanted and the fairy tale her life was beginning to turn into, evaporated. That rainy June morning flashed back into her mind — the morning when her carefree childhood ended, replaced by gray weekdays full of disappointment and loneliness.

CHAPTER 2

Once, in the late nineties, as she was finishing her degree in economics, Amanda was certain that boundless prospects lay ahead of her. She had aced her penultimate exam and had already chosen a lavish graduation dress reminiscent of a Princess Diana outfit. Amanda knew exactly who would be on her arm at the ball: Ben Green, the top graduate of Huntington University's Class of '98, a handsome guy with great promise.

They started dating in their junior year. At a student party, Ben played a song he'd written on the guitar; the last line was an invitation to a date. It touched the heart of the once-unapproachable Amanda Phelps. Two years later, they were spinning in a slow dance at their graduation night.

The most ambitious couple in the university was the center of attention. Ahead lay a long, happy, and successful life — at least, that's what the professors predicted, and Ben himself had no doubt.

"I've waited so long for this moment, you have no idea," he whispered. "You and me, graduates, dancing our dance..."

"I've been waiting too, Ben."

"I don't see much excitement on your face. Is it because you didn't fit into that red dress? Forget it, you're even more beautiful in this one. I love you in any look. Have fun, it's our celebration!"

Ben put his arm around Amanda's waist and gently kissed her forehead.

"Ben," she said anxiously. "I need to tell you something."

"Yeah? What is it?"

"Just promise me you won't react too harshly. I don't want people to hear us."

"What are you talking about?" Ben froze in confusion.

"Ben, I'm... I'm pregnant. You're going to be a father."

He stopped abruptly. The melodic music died down, and the hall exploded with rhythmic tracks by the band Modest Mouse.

"What did you say? Wait... you're joking, right?"

"No. I'm already four months along. That's why I didn't fit into that dress."

"You... what?"

Ben's eyes filled with rage. Looking at the flustered Amanda, he saw only the collapse of the future he had worked for all those years. His stubbled face flushed red, which genuinely frightened the girl — she had never seen him like this.

"Ben, I thought you'd be happy. We're going to have a baby, I even know the gender..."

Amanda tried to put her arms around his neck, but he pushed her away roughly.

"Do you even realize..." Ben wiped sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his light-blue shirt, grabbed Amanda by the wrist, and dragged her toward the exit. "Come on. We're discussing this outside."

Lighting a strong Marlboro, Ben paced back and forth. A lone streetlamp illuminated the campus courtyard, making the atmosphere even more oppressive.

"How long have you known?"

"Two months."

"Dammit!" Ben kicked the railing hard.

"Ben! We were so happy..."

"I don't know what to think, Mandy! You stayed silent for two months while I was laying out career plans for you! You smiled to my face, knowing all of this was going to hell. My parents won't forgive this... You..."

He stood flush against Amanda, bracing his hand against the wall and piercing her with a heavy gaze.

"Ben, I..."

“What? Did you do it on purpose to tie me down?”

“No!”

Amanda burst into tears, no longer able to hide her fear. Ben smoked one cigarette after another until the pack was empty. They didn't return to the hall that evening. Ben called a taxi, helped her into the car, and, slamming the door, walked silently into the darkness.

Amanda risked being a single mother, but Ben, raised in a religious family, made a difficult decision. His parents wouldn't have tolerated an abortion, but an out-of-wedlock child was a disgrace to them. After three weeks of heavy silence, Ben came to the Phelps house with a bouquet of peonies.

“You?” Amanda opened the door, hiding her eyes.

Ben immediately noticed her stomach. By this time, it had become clearly visible. Hiding the pregnancy was now pointless.

“I... came to apologize for that night. And for my silence, too.”

“I thought you'd run off to the other side of the country,” Amanda said quietly, wiping her eyes.

Ben smirked sadly.

“I know the baby wasn't part of your plans,” she began to justify herself. “It's my fault. You don't have to... build your career, I won't file for child support.”

“Amanda, wait. Yes, the news was a shock. I wasn't ready... But I've thought it over. Here, this is for you.”

Ben, forcing a smile, held out the bouquet. Their conversation was interrupted by Mr. Phelps, Amanda's father, who suddenly appeared behind Ben with heavy bags of groceries.

“Dad, did you forget your glasses in the car again?” Amanda smiled weakly.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Phelps,” Ben stammered.

“Oh, it's you. You came to your senses, then?” Her father shot the young man a stern look.

“Well, don't stand on the threshold. Come in. We won't eat you. Fiona baked a tart.”

That evening, over tea and pie, Ben officially apologized to the Phelps family and proposed to Amanda. Three weeks later, they had a modest civil ceremony in the presence of their parents.

Amanda moved in with the Greens. A week later, Ben got his first serious job at Heights Finance Inc. The company saw immense potential in him. Ben's joy knew no bounds, but he didn't yet know the price at which this luck had come. Amanda, meanwhile, at seven months pregnant, began to realize: her career might never start. She enjoyed the role of a homemaker, but the question of unfulfilled dreams haunted her for years.

Twelve years passed. Their daughter, named after the actress Allison Hayes, turned thirteen. Ben had made a brilliant career, becoming a lead analyst, bought a house in Greenwood and a brand-new Honda Accord. He never once betrayed his dream of being the best, but as his colleague used to say: “Huge success at work is a collapse in your personal life.” She was right.

One overcast summer morning, Amanda woke up to find an A4 sheet on the nightstand, written on both sides:

“Dear Amanda, as much as I didn't want this to happen, it has. I'm leaving. For good. I didn't want a scene in front of our daughter, so I'm writing this letter. Please don't show it to Allison. Tell her I'm on a business trip. I don't want to hurt her with my sudden disappearance.

Right now you're sleeping, certain that I'll be back by morning. And you're right. I'll be back, but only for my things. Mandy, it hurts me to say this, but I stopped loving you the day I found out about the fourth month of pregnancy. All these years I've lived with guilt and disappointment.

I'll tell you a secret: that day, I really was going to leave for another state. But before coming to you with the peonies, I ran into your father at Kroger. That damn guerrilla cornered me at the counter and set a condition. He promised to get me into his friend's firm if I proposed to you. And if not, he promised to find me under the earth and ruin my life. I had no choice.

Your father has been gone for three months now, and I am simultaneously grateful to him and hate him for what he did to us. Now I'm leaving with a clear conscience, knowing you know the truth. For thirteen years, I've been a prisoner. Even Allison couldn't revive my feelings for you.

And one last thing: for the past two years, I've been having an affair. I often hung out with my colleague Daria, the same one who was over for Thanksgiving.

I'm sorry, Mandy. I'm a scoundrel, and you have every right to hate me.

Daria and I have been scouted by a major firm in New York, and I'm not missing this chance. I've already filed the divorce papers. The house and the pickup are yours. I won't fight for custody of Allison, but I'll send two thousand dollars every month for her support. I hope you stop being a boring housewife and take care of yourself.

Goodbye. No longer yours, Ben Green."

This letter shattered their world. In an instant, Allison became a victim of bullying at school and abuse at home, fighting PTSD alone. Amanda, meanwhile, sank into depression, drowning her pain in cheap alcohol.

Only two years later did Amanda decide to start with a clean slate by moving. Ho even now, sitting by the fireplace in the new house, she reread that treacherous letter over and over, washing down every sentence with a semi-dry red.

CHAPTER 3

The second hand smoothly reaches twelve. Exactly seven in the morning. The alarm begins its obnoxious beeping until Allison, trying in vain to finish a final dream, switches it off.

Rising with difficulty, she walked over to the mirror on the closet door. She turned on the floor lamp standing nearby and immediately regretted it: even the dim light ruthlessly highlighted the consequences of the previous night.

Until almost three in the morning, she had lain in bed, buried under the covers, trying to drown out the sound of Amanda's crying from the living room while swallowing her own tears. Exhaustion had only claimed her toward dawn.

Heading to the bathroom, Allison glanced at the living room. Amanda had ended up sleeping there. Apparently, she hadn't had the strength to make it to the bedroom during the night, and now she lay curled in a ball on the small sofa, her legs barely fitting. Clutching a piece of paper like a teddy bear and wearing Ben's heavy robe over her pajamas, Amanda was sound asleep.

On the coffee table sat two empty wine bottles and a plate with dried-out pasta. Passing by, Allison accidentally nudged a glass lying on the rug. Afraid of waking her mother, she froze, then quietly took the remote and turned off the TV, which was silently broadcasting a rerun of a cooking show.

The room went dark. Allison cast a sad glance at her mother through the light spilling from the hallway and, shuffling in slippers that were too big for her, went to the bathroom.

Locking the door, she turned the shower on full blast. Sitting on the toilet lid, the girl began to sob again. To keep her mother from hearing her over the noise of the water, Allison pressed her hands over her mouth with all her might until the hysterical fit subsided.

She knew what piece of paper Amanda was clutching. Covered on both sides in black gel pen, with those sweeping capital letters, her father's handwriting was more recognizable than ever. Allison had hoped all the horrors of Greenwood were in the past, but the pain inflicted by Ben hadn't gone anywhere. It had moved into this house with them.

Nearly an hour passed before Allison regained her composure. She showered and washed her face several times with ice-cold water to reduce the swelling. Carefully brushing her thin light-brown hair, she pulled it into a loose bun and tried to use her mom's concealer to hide the shadows under her swollen hazel eyes.

The thought that her appearance would scare Miles away wouldn't leave her alone. She was afraid their connection would end as abruptly as it had begun.

Returning to the room, Allison noticed that the sofa in the living room was empty. The letter and the bottles were gone as if they had never existed. For a moment, she felt afraid: what if her mother had woken up from her crying? But she quickly dismissed the thought, hoping Amanda had been woken by something else. In their family, showing weakness wasn't a thing, it was the result of the harsh upbringing by Mr. Phelps, a Vietnam veteran.

In life, her grandfather had forbidden his wife and daughter from crying or showing sympathy to anyone. Even little Allison had been scolded for being "overly emotional." Amanda had grown up in this system of coordinates and considered it the norm, but Allison understood: feelings mattered. Nevertheless, she continued to hide them from her mother, who lost all control during her breakdowns.

Trying not to think about the domestic drama, Allison pulled on black pants and a worn-out hoodie with her favorite band's logo. Looking in the mirror again, she sighed: "I look terrible. I hope Miles oversleeps today."

To her surprise, the school bus, usually punctual, was a couple of minutes late today, which saved Allison from being tardy. By 8:30, she was already at school. Looking around in hopes of avoiding Miles, she trudged toward her locker. But he was waiting for her, standing next to Sam.

“Hey, Allison!” Miles smiled. Sam, pursing his lips, waved at her and, clapping his friend on the shoulder, quickly walked away.

Miles seemed to want to hug her, but as soon as she got closer, he froze. His expression changed. Panic seized Allison. She thought he was just going to turn around and leave. A phrase she’d heard once — “looks are everything” — was firmly lodged in her head.

“You look like you’re doing pretty rough,” he said, flustered. “Did something happen, or did you just not get enough sleep?”

“Hey. Yeah... not so much ‘happened,’ just... it was a long night,” Allison forced a smile, but her voice trembled.

“Studying the new Physics topic?” Miles nodded at the textbook in her hands.

“Oh, um...” She hesitated. More than anything in the world, she didn’t want to drag him into her family problems. Dropping her eyes, she stayed silent.

“I hope it’s not because of me?” Miles asked, growing concerned. “I don’t want to pressure you, it’s just... I have serious plans for you, and I’d hate to get my hopes up for nothing. If you know what I mean.”

Allison instantly forgot her fears. That “butterflies” feeling appeared in her stomach, and a light shiver ran through her body. “God, am I falling in love?” flashed through her mind.

“No, not at all!” she exclaimed. “I’m really glad we’re talking. It’s just... it was a tough evening. Personal stuff... sorry.”

“Oh, sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s fine. Just typical family drama. It definitely has nothing to do with you.”

Usually shy with strangers, Allison suddenly felt comfortable around Miles. Her stiffness began to vanish. After five minutes of chatting, her mood had completely improved.

“Actually, I was afraid the way I look would scare you off,” she confessed, closing her locker. “So, we’re still on for today?”

“No way, is that what you think of me?” Miles feigned offense and made a face, making her laugh. “Of course we’re still on.”

At that moment, Judy burst in like a whirlwind, as usual, accompanied by Rachel.

“Hey guys!” Judy hugged Allison from behind.

“Whoa, you look stunning!” Allison was amazed. Usually, Judy preferred sweatshirts and didn’t spend time on her hair, but today her blonde hair was in soft waves, and she was wearing an elegant classic suit.

“Hey Jude, Rachel,” Miles raised his eyebrows in surprise. “What’s the occasion? Did Tom invite you to a business lunch to discuss school politics?”

“No! I have an audition today for the youth talent theater. I don’t want to fall flat on my face, so today I’m a business lady.”

She spun around playfully, showing off the outfit. The bell rang.

“Well, we gotta get to Biology; there’s a test,” Rachel urged her friend.

“Don’t be bored! See you in the cafeteria!” Judy shouted, running off.

Allison looked at Miles questioningly.

“Anyway, I’ll wait for you after school in the same spot,” he said, adjusting his backpack. “And yeah, you look really cute. I like it. But make sure you catch up on sleep this weekend.”

Miles hugged her, and they headed to their separate classrooms.

“Actually, there’s one more amazing fact about him,” Miles said, looking at Allison while lighting his third cigarette.

“What?”

They were walking slowly toward her house. For the last twenty minutes, Miles had been enthusiastically retelling true crime stories, which, as it turned out, they both loved.

“How he escaped from prison! It’s brilliant. He carved a gun model out of a piece of wood and painted it with shoe polish. The fake was so realistic that John intimidated the guards, locked them up, took their real weapons, and escaped through the garage. Isn’t that masterful?” Miles laughed, clearly proud of his fellow countryman — gangster John Dillinger.

“It really is bold,” Allison smiled. “And how did he die?”

“His lover turned him in,” Miles suddenly stopped and looked at her intently. “Wait, are you cold?”

“Well, a little. I overslept and didn’t check the forecast. At least it’s not raining.”

The weather really was gloomy: heavy clouds, a cold wind. Miles unhesitatingly took off his black bomber jacket with vintage patches and draped it over her shoulders. He was left in just a light sweater.

“Here. Now give me your hand, I’ll warm it up.”

He interlaced his fingers with hers.

“So, like I was saying... Anna Sage sold him out. She went to the police and told them Dillinger had come to her brothel...”

Allison almost stopped hearing the words. She drowned in the sensations. His hand was so warm it heated her entire body, and his husky voice resonated somewhere deep inside.

“Allison? You still with me?”

“Yeah... the three of them went to the movies,” she repeated randomly, surfacing from her thoughts.

“Speaking of movies,” Miles smirked. Thinking she was worrying about her own stuff again, he changed the subject: “Anyway, the guys and I are going to the new zombie horror flick tomorrow. And then a sleepover at Tom’s; his parents are out of town. There’ll be board games, music, and probably a couple of bottles of whiskey. I want you to come too.”

Allison looked away.

“If your parents won’t let you stay the night, no big deal,” he added softly. “But can you at least come to the movie?”

“Yeah, I’d love to go to the cinema,” she replied, suppressing a sudden surge of anxiety. “Who else is going?”

“The whole group.”

They stopped fifty feet from her house. It was getting dark on the street, and thunder rumbled in the distance.

“You okay? Not tired?”

“There’s my house,” she pointed to the building three lots down. “I’m fine. Time flies when I’m with you.”

“Oh, sorry, I haven’t exactly memorized which one is yours yet. They look alike.” Miles laughed. “I’m really glad about today, Allison. I mean it.”

Thunder rumbled again, closer this time. Miles hurried, but still held her hand tightly.

“Until tomorrow?”

“Yeah, until tomorrow, Miles,” she called him by his name out loud for the first time, and a shiver ran down her spine. “Do you have far to go? It’s about to pour.”

“I’d take that as an invitation for tea, but I’m not that gullible,” he winked. “Don’t worry, I live on Guilford Avenue; it’s about a twenty-five-minute walk. I’ll make it.”

He hugged her goodbye.

“I’ll call tomorrow if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind.”

“And one more thing, Allison. Looks don’t depend on clothes or hair. Not even on makeup. It depends on the song your soul is singing. Remember that.”

He walked away, hands in his pockets. Allison went into the house, filled with happiness. It was quiet inside, Amanda wasn’t there. Dropping her bag, the girl walked to the mirror and only then noticed she was still wearing Miles’s jacket.

She didn’t take it off. Taking a cigarette out of the bomber pocket (she had never smoked, but she wanted to feel his world), Allison put on her headphones and lost herself in a dance to her new favorite song.

“Dear Diary, today is Friday, October 3, 2014.

In three weeks I’ll be sixteen, but I feel like a child. Time is flying too fast. A year ago I was crushed by life, and now, at the beginning of October, I feel alive again.

I have friends. Sometimes it feels like a prank or a reality show — that’s how unbelievable this friendship feels. And Miles... He’s turned my head. Now I know what ‘butterflies in the stomach’ are and why your knees go weak. I’m giving him pieces of myself as if under hypnosis. He’s still a mystery to me, but I’m drowning in him.”

Around midnight, Amanda returned. The downpour had soaked her to the bone. She left her umbrella by the door, swapped her boots for Uggs, and tiredly trudged to the kitchen with a bag of groceries. Allison was already asleep and didn’t hear her mother opening another bottle, sitting in front of the TV to once again try to drown out her life.

CHAPTER 4

The next morning brought a surprise for Allison.

Despite the fact that Amanda had gone to bed long after midnight, she had been busy in the kitchen since dawn. The sweet aroma of freshly made pancakes wafting through the house pulled Allison out of her sleep. Usually, her mother didn't get up before eleven, but the habits of a once-flawless housewife seemed to live on within her, independent of her new, broken personality.

"Good morning, Mom."

"Good morning, honey," Amanda responded in an unusually upbeat mood, deftly flipping a pancake in the pan.

"What's going on?"

"What do you mean?" her mother asked without looking up from her task.

"You haven't made breakfast in two years. And you usually sleep until noon. But today..."

"But today, everything is different." Amanda set a plate on the table, generously drizzled with cranberry syrup. "Sit down and eat."

Allison sank into her chair in confusion. "Mom, I don't understand."

"Well, I didn't want to say anything prematurely, but the money from your father has stopped being enough. After all those real estate deals, we've ended up in a serious deficit. Anyway, I've made a decision: I'm going back to work."

"Whoa... no kidding."

"Yes, I have an interview in an hour. It's not the most prestigious job, but you have to start somewhere."

Amanda hurriedly served herself a portion and finally sat down across from her daughter.

"And what will you be doing?"

"In college, I worked part-time at a bar; it was fun. I'm sure everything has changed now, but I don't really know how to do anything else — my degrees have lost all their weight after all these years. I'll start behind the bar, and who knows, maybe I'll be promoted to manager eventually."

Allison froze, unsure how to react. On one hand, she was glad her mother would stop moping around the house. On the other, the image of a grown, educated woman behind a bar in some questionable establishment made her feel uneasy.

"In a bar? I thought only students worked there."

"Not only students, Allison. You've never been in one, how would you know?" Amanda tossed out flippantly. "The tips are quite decent these days."

Allison remained silent, picking at her pancake without appetite.

"Well, that's it, I have to go!"

Her mother suddenly kissed her on the forehead — the gesture was so long-forgotten that Allison flinched. Amanda caught a quick glimpse of herself in the mirror, grabbed her keys, and hurried out the door.

"What a morning..." Allison whispered.

At that moment, the cell phone she had barely let out of her hands came to life.

"Hello? Good morning, Allison. I'm calling just like I promised. Is it too early?"

"No, just right! Hey, Miles."

"So, did you get permission?"

"Still in the process, but I think everything will be great."

"Are you sure? Just so you know: even if they don't let you, I'm coming at seven and I'll hang out under your window until you come out."

"Oh, is that a threat?"

"Oh, and is this flirting?"

They both laughed awkwardly.

“How did you sleep?” Miles interrupted the pause.

“Very... soundly.”

“I see. Well, I dreamed about you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I don’t remember the details, I just remember you were there. I woke up with a pleasant feeling.”

“Yeah? So, I wasn’t chasing you in a cockroach costume with a toy chainsaw?”

Miles burst out laughing so loudly that Allison had to pull the phone away from her ear. “My God! Is that the only kind of thing you dream about?”

“Well, I’m joking,” Allison suddenly felt embarrassed.

“I get it, I get it... Anyway, I won’t bug you. Text me as soon as you find out about the movie and the sleepover. But remember: my threat stands.”

“Okay, Miles.”

“See ya, Allison. See you later. Lo — » Miles cut himself off and hastily hung up.

Allison froze. She had clearly heard that unfinished syllable, and her face instantly flushed a deep red. Her mood soared at cosmic speed. She ran into her room, jumped onto the bed with a flying start, and, getting tangled in her headphone cords, turned on Coldplay. The world around her ceased to exist.

A couple of hours later, Amanda returned. Allison was in the living room watching a movie, cozily wrapped in a blanket. Hearing the front door slam, she instinctively jumped up and turned off the TV — that sound in their house rarely heralded anything good.

“I’m home, sweetie,” Amanda entered the room.

“Well? How was it?”

Her mother sat on the sofa, took a sip of her daughter’s cold tea, and held a heavy silence.

“Terrible. They hired me. I’m no longer a housewife; I’m a bartender.”

Allison exhaled, but doubts remained. “That’s good... But are you sure you want this?”

“Want it?!” Amanda flared up. “Are you out of your mind? I’m an excellent analyst, but I have zero years of experience at forty! I don’t have a choice. Family was my first priority, unlike your father, and this is the result: at thirty-eight years old, I’m standing behind a damn bar!”

“I’m sorry, Mom...”

“What do you have to apologize for...” Amanda rose abruptly. “Where’s my wine? I’m going to ‘celebrate’ this brilliant event.”

“Mom!”

“Don’t you dare lecture me!” Amanda’s voice broke into a scream. She turned around, and Allison saw a frightening, almost wolf-like glint in her eyes. “I’m tired! And I don’t care that it’s only lunchtime! My life is going to hell, don’t you dare make it harder for me!”

Allison trembled. The argument ended with an order to change out of her pajamas and a furious slam of the kitchen door.

Neither at lunch nor later did she manage to get permission. Any attempt to speak was met with a wall of irritation. Amanda drank, and with every glass, she sank deeper into her rage.

As the clock neared seven, Allison made a decision: she was going. She would risk everything.

She put on her favorite burgundy flannel shirt and black pants. She touched up her lashes and applied some lip gloss. Her gaze fell on Miles’s jacket. The most important thing is not to forget it.

At 6:50, the phone rang.

“Hello, Allison? I’m almost there. ‘No’ is not an acceptable answer.”

“Yes, I... I’m ready. But you’re early!”

“I was afraid of being late. I’m waiting for you.”

Allison grabbed her purse and Miles's bomber jacket. A sinister silence had fallen over the living room: Amanda was sleeping on the sofa in a total blackout. Two empty wine bottles guaranteed she wouldn't wake up even if a cannon went off.

Allison quickly scribbled a note: "Mom, don't worry, I'm at a friend's for a sleepover. Sorry, I couldn't get permission. Love, Allison."

She slipped out of the house, trying not to let the stairs creak. A gray Hyundai was idling at the curb. Miles was smiling from the window.

"I didn't know you had a car," Allison said, sitting in the passenger seat.

"My dad's. He lent it for the evening when he found out I was taking out a very beautiful lady. Get in, it's cold."

She laid his jacket on her knees. "I'm sorry you had to freeze yesterday."

"It's nothing. Today I'm a respectable gentleman in a grandpa coat," he nodded at a black vintage coat on the back seat. "I'm a fan of the old school: rap, the Lakers, guns, and a dream of moving to Chicago. That's why Sam and I are friends — yin and yang."

"I wouldn't have guessed. I thought you liked Lana Del Rey and romance novels," Allison teased him.

They both laughed, and the awkwardness of the past few days finally melted away.

"Where are we going?"

"To Glendale. There's no traffic there; we'll be there in fifteen minutes. By the way... what about the sleepover?"

"I was let off," Allison lied, trying to keep her voice from wavering.

"Really?!" Miles beamed. "Awesome! Well, I had to work my tail off for grades just to get the car. I'm a hundred percent happy."

He turned on the radio. The first chords of Radiohead's "Creep" began to play.

"Leave it, please," Allison asked.

"You like Radiohead? Well, now I like them too."

"But what about Eminem? He won't understand."

"I love rap, but I'm not limited to just that." Miles picked up speed.

A mercilessly bright sunset was burning out ahead of them. They argued about music, from Cobain to jazz, and it felt to Allison as if this road was the safest and most right place on earth.

CHAPTER 5

The noisy group spilled out of the movie theater well after ten o'clock in the evening. Bursts of conversation about the film filled the air as they ignored the night chill and the few passersby. They wandered toward the parking lot, teasing one another and even dancing a bit to their own off-key humming.

"I don't know about you guys, but I am never setting foot in Paris now!" Judy proclaimed at the top of her lungs.

"Oh, like you've actually been there even once," Tom teased.

"Oh, shut up!" Judy laughed, jumping onto his back and wrapping her arms around his neck. "Since you're so smart, you can carry me to the car!"

"Fine, fine, we're almost there anyway," Tom grumbled, though he dutifully caught her behind the knees to steady her.

"So, are we heading to your place?" Sam interrupted. "Is the booze on-site?"

"I went through the trouble of digging up a couple of bottles of whiskey. Did you people bring anything... illicit?"

"How did you get your hands on that?" Rachel asked curiously.

"What do I have an older brother for?" Tom gave a proud smirk. "Did you think I made up with him after that incident just for the sake of it? I might as well get some benefit out of it."

Allison gave Miles's sleeve a light tug and whispered, "What incident?"

"I'll tell you later," he whispered back with a chuckle. "It's a sore subject for him."

Soon they split into the cars — Miles's and Tom's- and set a course for Haven Ford Avenue.

The Calhoun family home was impressive: a light-colored, two-story house with a cozy attic. The terrace featured stylish hanging chairs, the lawn was trimmed with surgical precision, and the fallen leaves were neatly packed into bags. Inside, everything breathed a sense of luxurious comfort in soft pastel tones.

"It's beautiful here," Allison remarked, looking around.

"Yeah, Mrs. Calhoun is obsessed with cleaning," Judy chimed in, flopping onto a massive leather sofa. "It's a miracle she hasn't made us wear surgical booties at the door yet."

"We've already discussed this, Jude," Tom grumbled, emerging from the kitchen with a handful of glasses and a bottle of eighteen-year-old Glenfiddich.

The evening picked up speed. Tom poured the whiskey, Judy brought out a mountain of snacks, and Miles and Sam got into a heated debate about basketball. Rachel settled on an ottoman next to Allison and decided to talk to her directly for the first time.

"Hey, I'm glad you got let out, Al."

"Allison," she corrected softly but firmly. "My name is Al-li-son."

"Oh, sorry, I didn't know you hated nicknames."

"It's fine. Just... a habit. I'm glad to be here, too."

An involuntary wave of panic washed over Allison. Caught up in the euphoria, she had completely forgotten how recklessly she had run away from home. She stealthily pulled out her phone — the screen was blank. No calls, no messages. The tension eased slightly.

"Psychologists say that if someone in a group stays glued to their phone, it means they're uncomfortable," Rachel suddenly noted, squinting.

"No, I was just checking the time..."

"Sure," Rachel lowered her voice to a whisper, leaning in. "Tell me the truth: what's the deal with you and Miles? Is something happening, or did you just 'suddenly' become best friends?"

The question caught Allison off guard. She didn't know the answer herself. Fortunately, at that moment, Tom cranked up the music.

“Oh no, Tom! Not Twenty One Pilots again!” Sam wailed.

“My house, my rules!” Tom laughed, handing out glasses. “To a great night, guys!”

By three in the morning, the house was submerged in a thick, amber-lit gloom. The air in the living room grew heavy with smoke and the scent of spilled whiskey. Judy and Tom had long since disappeared upstairs — their muffled laughter and the creak of the stairs had briefly animated the silence, but soon everything went quiet. Rachel, curled in a ball in a deep armchair, was sleeping so soundly she didn’t wake even when Allison covered her with a wool blanket. Only Miles and Sam remained before the TV; the glow from the console painted their faces in neon blues and greens, and their quiet bickering over a lost round sounded like a lazy whisper.

Allison felt the walls starting to close in on her. The diffused lamplight and the smell of tobacco clouded her mind, and a faint throb of anxiety — a remnant of the alcohol she’d consumed — began to pulse in her temples. She needed to get outside.

Grabbing her jacket and trying not to let the parquet creak, she slipped through the kitchen door onto the back deck.

Outside, the deep twilight reigned that only exists just before dawn. The cold air instantly pierced her lungs, flushing out the stale smell of the party. Allison froze on the top step of the terrace. The perfect silence of the neighborhood was almost tangible: only a few late autumn crickets chirped lazily in the thick grass, and the wind barely brushed the tree branches, making their shadows dance on the white railings.

She sat on a wooden bench, hugging herself. Here, under the vast dome of an indifferent night sky, everything felt simpler. There was no alcoholic mother, no heavy letters from her father, no fear of tomorrow. There was only her and this cold, clean serenity.

The quiet creak of the door made her turn. Miles appeared in the doorway. He had tossed his coat on carelessly and was carrying another blanket, fluffy and warm.

“You look like you’re trying to make a break for it,” he said softly as he walked closer. His voice sounded deeper and richer than usual in the nighttime silence. “Sam finally ‘drifted off’ in there. He fell asleep with the controller in his hands.”

“I just wanted some quiet,” Allison moved over to make room. “Want to sit?”

Miles sat down beside her. He didn’t light a cigarette immediately, but just sat there, looking at the dark silhouette of the woods beyond the fence.

“Here, you’ll freeze,” he draped the blanket over her shoulders, and for a moment his fingers brushed her neck. Allison flinched at the fleeting contact; a wave of warmth that had nothing to do with the air temperature rushed through her.

He eventually pulled a cigarette from behind his ear and flicked his lighter — the tiny flame momentarily carving his focused face, the stubborn curve of his lips, and a stray lock of hair out of the darkness.

“Did you actually like it?” he asked, blowing a stream of smoke upward. “The party, the guys... You looked all evening like you were waiting for a catch.”

“It was... surprising,” Allison admitted honestly. “Rachel crowing in the yard at two in the morning was exactly what I needed for total happiness. And the way we got tied in knots playing Twister. I haven’t laughed like that in a long time.”

“This is just the beginning,” Miles smirked and looked at her. “That’s how we live. Stupid, loud, but at least it’s real.”

He told her the story about Tom’s brother and the “floral perfume” that turned out to be insect bait. He told it in character, acting out Tom running across the lawn fending off wasps, while Allison laughed into her hand, afraid of waking those sleeping inside.

Then the laughter died down. Silence returned, but now it was different — electric and thick. Miles crushed his cigarette against the edge of the ash tray and turned toward her. He leaned on his knees, closing the distance.

“Allison...”

She froze, afraid to move. The air between them felt as dense as water. Miles moved even closer until their shoulders touched under the shared blanket. He looked straight into her eyes — hazel, now appearing almost black in the dark. There was no trace of his usual bravado in his gaze, only a strange, frightening tenderness.

“You are very beautiful,” he whispered. “And it’s not because of the mascara on your lashes.”

His hand rose slowly, and he touched her cheek with the back of his hand. His fingers were warm, smelling faintly of tobacco. Allison’s heart broke into a frantic rhythm, pounding against her ribs so hard she felt certain Miles could hear it. She couldn’t look away, as if caught in a gravitational field with no exit.

When his lips touched hers — cautiously at first, almost weightlessly — time simply stopped for Allison. It was the taste of cherry gloss, bitter resin, and the night chill. The first kiss of her life. It wasn’t like the movies. It was more hesitant, a bit awkward, but it sent such a powerful feeling through her veins that her head spun. She closed her eyes, finally surrendering to the moment, allowing herself to forget who she was and what was waiting for her back home.

They sat on that terrace until the very break of dawn. The sky slowly turned to steel, then pearl. They barely spoke, just sat with their fingers intertwined, covered by a single blanket between them. Miles gently toyed with the strands of her hair, and Allison rested her head on his shoulder, feeling the steady beat of his heart.

Only when the first rays of the sun touched the tops of the pines did Miles whisper softly:

“Let’s go inside. You need to get at least a little sleep.”

He settled her on the sofa himself, tucking a soft pillow under her head and covering her with the same blanket that still held their shared warmth. Miles didn’t go upstairs — he settled in a chair nearby, and the last thing Allison saw before falling into a deep, peaceful sleep was his smile in the morning light.

Waking up was difficult. Around noon, Judy burst into the living room — sleepy-eyed but still full of energy. The group began to slowly pack up. Rachel left first, grumbling about a headache; Sam grabbed his backpack and raced off to practice.

In Miles’s car on the way back, a strange silence reigned. That specific awkwardness that always follows something important. They both understood that in those few hours on the terrace, something had changed irrevocably.

“Well, here’s your castle,” Miles stopped at Allison’s house. “The vintage fence is still standing.”

Allison looked at her windows. They looked dark and unfriendly.

“Thanks, Miles. For everything.”

“See you tomorrow?” he caught her hand on the door handle.

“See you tomorrow.”

He kissed her again — quickly this time, on the corner of her mouth — but the gesture gave her strength.

The car drove away. Allison stood by the gate, breathing in the scent of damp earth. She knew that as soon as she opened the front door, the fairy tale would end. Trying to keep the remnants of the warmth Miles had given her inside, she turned the key in the lock.

The house didn’t smell like pancakes. It smelled of burnt food and something sour.

Her note lay on the floor in the hallway, torn to shreds, as if it had been trampled in a rage. Allison walked into the living room and froze.

“Mom?” Allison called out, her voice cracking.

CHAPTER 6

Breathing heavily and shielding her face from the biting morning light, Amanda woke up on the sofa. The air in the living room felt sour, saturated with the fumes of cheap whiskey and long-standing misery. Every cell in her body screamed from the previous night's binge. Her muscles ached, her bones felt as if they were filled with lead, and a dull, lingering pain pulsed rhythmically in her temples. The last time she had felt this wretched was in her youth, after food poisoning in a cheap Greenwood diner that smelled of rancid oil and failed hopes.

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